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Local Teens Start Lafayette Writing Contest for Middle School Students

By Clare Varellas



Linnae Johansson and Uma Unni Photo provided

When Acalanes freshman Uma Unni began to experience the typical boredom that comes with being out of school this past summer, she and her friend, Stanley Middle School eighth grader Linnae Johansson, decided to put their technological and planning skills to the test by creating a Lafayette youth writing and photography contest.

"I really like technology, so I wanted to make a website," said Uma. "I also really like writing, so I thought I would make a literary website. But we had no idea how to make people come to it, so we thought we'd make a contest. Then Linnae agreed to help me out. That's how it started."

Uma and Linnae are the founders of the newly formed Lafayette Youth Arts Society, which will be hosting its first annual writing and photography contest this winter. The contest, which is to open Nov. 15, offers all middle school students (students in grades 6-8) who reside or attend school in Lafayette the opportunity to showcase their artistic abilities. The girls based their contest model off of that of the Orinda Junior Women's Club Youth Ink Contest, which is only open to Orinda residents.

"There's a contest like this in Orinda called Orinda Ink, and it's only open to Orinda kids, so there's part of where we got the idea," said Uma. "Lafayette kids aren't allowed to enter, so we don't have anything to do like that."

The contest, which Uma and Linnae largely planned over the summer, is no small affair. Not only have the girls raised over \$2,000 to be awarded as prize money, but they have also secured none other than the acclaimed author Lemony Snicket (Daniel Handler) to judge the writing entries, along with two other experienced writers. Uma and Linnae, avid fans of Snicket's works, are ecstatic to have him on the judging panel.

"I'm really excited," said Linnae. "I read his books so much as a kid, and now we might actually meet him."

The judging panel for the photography contest is impressive as well, with experienced local photographers, two of which are professionals.

The girls raised funds by contacting local businesses and requesting support; many, like Susie Cakes, Patxi's, Diablo Foods, Metro Lafayette, and Powell's, agreed to contribute. Uma and Linnae have the support of the executive director of the Lafayette Library as well, and have made plans to display winning entries at the library after they are announced.

The girls were initially inclined to create the contest because of their passions for writing. Both Uma and Linnae write in their free time and post entries on writing blogs regularly. They feel that the writing contest will give middle schoolers the ability to write about a topic and in a format that appeals to them, whether the piece takes form in a poem, essay, or short story. In turn, they hope that through this contest, more students will realize the joys of writing.

"In school, you generally are told to write an essay, but here we're only giving them a theme, and we're telling [contestants] to write what they want," said Linnae. "So it makes them think about [what they want to write about]."

The only limitations on entries will be that the writing piece cannot exceed 1,000 words, the photography may only be edited to an extent, and there will be certain themes for entries to be announced on Nov. 15. The contest will last two months, with final submissions due Jan. 15. Winners will be announced March 30, and an awards ceremony will follow.

After spending so many hours planning the contest, the girls are very excited to see its results. If all goes well, they want to continue hosting the contest, and will even consider opening it up to communities outside of Lafayette, provided there are enough judges.

"We are hoping that kids in other communities will also be inspired to start their own contests," said Uma. "But they need to know that even though they may not get a positive response right away, they need to persevere and then they will be successful."

For further contest details, visit www.lafayetteyouthartssociety.com. Writing contest themes will be announced on Nov. 15. There will also be a book fair at Barnes and Noble in Walnut Creek Nov. 24-25 where the store will give 20 percent of all sales, both online or at the store, to benefit the Lafayette Youth Arts Society when the organization is mentioned.

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